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THE P.N.E.U. FROM A PARENT'S POINT OF VIEW

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By MRS. J. H. TASKER.

A Sunday book of our childhood was called "Eric or the Gold Thread." Frail, beautiful Eric was given a gold thread, and told that if he held tightly to it he would go safely through many dangers and difficulties. It would take him past roaring lions, through dark woods, along precipitous paths. And when Eric came to an enchanting spot with flowers and grass and a stream, he let go his gold thread in the excitement and delight, and it floated away from him. He went through terrible things before he re-captured it again, and eventually holding it he crossed the last deep river in peace and happiness. That is the story as I remember it, it may be inaccurately.

After all these years the idea of right principles being a gold thread to us through life, which the author must have meant to convey, comes to me as a vivid and helpful one.

My endeavour now is to show Miss Mason's teaching, Miss Mason's principles in education, as a gold thread for our safe guidance through the difficult and highly complicated times in which we find ourselves faced with the responsibility of bringing up children.

In a western country, where everyone is educated to a certain standard as a matter of course, because earlier generations have laboured to this end, we hardly stop to think "Why should people be educated?" We take it for granted. We would not be able to keep going in an everyday world if we had no education. Public opinion, followed by legislation, reaches out for more and more of education. The question in the west is not "why should a child be educated" but "how should a child be educated?"—on what lines, by what method or system, at what school?

We ask ourselves, which leader of thought shall I follow? Is my child all spirit? No, he obviously is not. Then is he all body? The wonderful work done by modern science seems to point to a physical and material basis and explanation for most things, and many take their guidance from this aspect only of modern thought. On the other hand there are leading minds that hold the belief that only through spiritual contact with an unseen

company of those who have gone before, can the world maintain its advance. And there are those too who think that the physical ought to be so entirely subservient to the spiritual power in us, that we should be able even to eliminate pain and evil from our lives and from the lives of others. Again, we may revert to the psychologists who claim great understanding of the science of mind. They will tell us what our children are thinking, and they offer to put right for us, when in trouble, the inward recesses of our own minds.

We are baffled and perplexed by all the different ideas that claim our attention, and all the different adherents of different systems, who are all sure theirs is the only and right way of facing the world and of approaching the responsibility of education. Perhaps in the end we are defeated, and fall back on the thought—'Well, I cannot do more than give my children a happy home, and make sure their childhood is a happy one. I will send them to the best possible school. I will sacrifice anything in order to be able to afford it, even a larger family. I will give the one or two children I have the very best of everything. I cannot do more, surely.'

All the time our question is not the *why* of education but the *how*.

Step out of the West for a moment, where education is taken for granted, and come with me to India, to have a glimpse of the great mass of uneducated peasants living in their villages, and then to have a look at the Hindu homes, and the Zenanas, where the women are uneducated, that is to say uneducated by Western standards. Immediately we are faced by the question 'why?' Why should they be educated? In the Indian towns and centres of modern life, it is obvious that people cannot keep pace with the times, without education. And I am convinced that ninety per cent of those who seek education for themselves or for their children, seek it for this reason only; also that a high percentage of the education given is directed to meet this demand *only*. Is it a wonder that comparatively few noble minds emerge? Seeing the results, we cry out 'Then why bring education to villages? Why urge Indian women to it? Surely they are better off as they are.'

Here is an obscure village where no educator, no agitator has penetrated. We in a motor car, are passing through the winding narrow streets between snug little mud-walled houses, and as the driver has great difficulty in negotiating the corners, we have an opportunity of studying the faces. We are not going on this occa-

sion to the heart of things, inside the houses. We are only getting an impression. What crowds of people for such a small hamlet. How pretty the women are, smiling, bright eyed, and shy, half covering their faces if our glance falls upon them. Each one seems to possess a vigorous brown baby. And there is an old Brahmin, the intellectual aristocrat of the village, with a beautiful fair child in his arms. How proud he is of it! Could paternal or patriarchal love be more beautifully portrayed on a countenance? Faces peer round every corner, and from every window and door, and they are nearly all smiling, eager faces. There now is the old pujari or priest inside the temple courtyard. How lovely is the carving of the gateway that frames him. How old it looks. For how many centuries has worship been conducted in that holy place? Now we have come through the village, and are out in the fields again. There are the men, some farther, some nearer, with bullocks and plough. A few pieces of wood make the plough—how simple and how effective! Why, oh why trouble this idyllic village with education, modern education? What have we to give that is better than what they have already got? They will only get ideas into their heads that will make them restless and unhappy. Do leave them alone to their undisturbed peacefulness until circumstances force them to come into the busy stream with the rest of us.

I am aware that I have given a superficial picture of a prosperous village in a year when the rains were good, and the crops plentiful, and the food supply amply sufficient. In the same way, passing through a lovely little English village in a motor car on a fine day, we should be left with an impression of idyllic peacefulness. We know there is a reverse side to both these pictures.

Now look at a Hindu home, or more specially a Zenana, a large household of relations, with the father and mother at the head, sons and sons' wives, and hosts of dependent women and servants and children. The boys are being brought up to think they are a special creation, but the girls in the Zenana, that are to be women one day, have to be kept secluded, partly a custom grown out of the original need for protection, but just as much that they may grow up amenable and adaptable to the wishes of a man later on. If you have never thought of life otherwise, it works not so badly. There are many and many happy Zenanas. There are many and many Zenanas where happiness and great beauty of character have developed in the midst of what to us are unthinkable conditions. Again, we know there is a reverse side, but is there not also a reverse side to many an English home? Why

change all this, why educate Indian women who accept life as it comes, to be restless and dissatisfied and to seek for a freedom that they can only get very often at the price of a tremendous upheaval and disintegration of all that has heretofore been held most dear? Those women in their homes do not need to be prepared to meet the everyday life we lead, and which we could not face without education. Our education is spurious to their lives in many respects. Why, oh why not leave them alone?—better their conditions of health and hygiene, try to introduce ideas of sanitation and simple rules for the health of their children, if we feel we are better off than they are and must do something, but why give them 'higher education?'

Such thoughts are puzzling. What is the answer?

I do not propose to say anything about education in India, but I want to make it clear, that unless we can answer to ourselves the *why* of education, we are not in a very strong position for answering the *how*. It is in this connection and facing these thoughts, that I have found Miss Mason's teaching go so far and so deep, and so high—in short, point out the ultimate, and with our eyes fixed on the ultimate, in how much more sure a position are we to deal with the immediate.

Now it seems to me that the ultimate is contained in the words 'Children are born persons.' This phrase is known to all of us of the P.N.E.U. It has perhaps become so familiar that we are a little dull to its meaning. We may be holding our gold thread with one hand. Have our eyes forgotten to look at it, to catch the brightness from it?

'Children are born persons.' Many people, most people, in an educated environment treat children with respect and kindness, treat them as persons, generally speaking; perhaps even treat them as the all-important persons of the household. But do the words light up our path at every difficult educational turning? Do they illuminate our everyday attitude not only towards our children but towards everyone else? They *can* do all this. A *person*, someone quite separate from us, someone with a direct relationship of his own towards the past, the present, the future, that *no one* else can share; someone who has to find out everything for himself; someone to whom we can give nothing, unless he be willing to receive it; someone who has a direct relationship with God, of his own. Dare we hinder such an one in the realisation of his life, in his rightful relationship to everything around? We can only look on at each other in a certain sense, because we cannot make or unmake the person. He exists as a separate entity

from ourselves. I want to emphasise the point of *every* person in this world being a *different* person, and all of us along-side of each other, and room for each one of us in our relationship with the world, with other persons, and in our direct relationship with God.

Let me take a physical illustration. Light is, exists, is everywhere, but *means* nothing till the eye is formed to receive it and make it manifest. But is another person's eye any use to me as an instrument of seeing? Not the least in the world. I must be blind for ever if I cannot see with my own eye. Again sound is everywhere all the time, but is not made manifest until there is an ear to hear it. Can I hear through another's ear? I must for ever be cut off from sound if I have not my own organ of hearing. And similarly, can it not be that God exists, is everywhere, in everything, but is made fully manifest only in a person? No other person can find God for me, I must find Him for myself. My relationship with Him is direct, instantaneous. I can lose Him, just as I can lose light and sound by damage to eye or ear, I can lose Him by damage to personality. But if I as a baby or child have never been damaged, and if in later years I have not damaged myself, should it not be natural to meet God at every turning, see Him in every happening, and feel that every moment of life is satisfying, for I only exist to make God manifest? Do we not all see in our truly good and great men and women such persons?

But if anything comes between? If by careless treatment at birth a baby's eye is damaged, for ever his perception of light, and of all the images that light brings, is obscured. He goes through life maimed. If by a cruel blow, or even by dirt and neglect and unclean slovenly living, a child's ear is damaged, his perception of sound is limited. He must for ever be shut off from something that exists for others but can never be his. And if the personality is 'despised, hindered, offended,' before it has fully developed, what an awful thought that the perception of God must be incomplete, unfulfilled. It seems truth too, that personality can be more hindered from over or unwise care, than from lack of care. We magnify our own importance in the development of our children, and think we know everything and are doing everything for their good, when we are really shutting them off from their right relationships, standing between them and God as shown to us in the world around, cutting off the light which their eyes are ready for and made to receive; keeping them in a darkened room that makes their eyes grow weak; intruding between them and the sounds that should be reaching their ears direct;

trying to explain to them what the sound means to us, instead of realising that the sound has as direct a meaning and relation to them as it has to us, and perhaps, and probably, even more direct.

With such thoughts of the "child a person", we begin to feel overawed, and to reproach ourselves with hindrance or injury that we have unwittingly committed in the past. It is an overwhelming thought, and we feel inclined to rush to the other extreme, and to do nothing lest it be interference. But need we? No, for there is the other point of view—each person's relation is direct with light, with sound, with God and short of extinction of life, we cannot stop it, short of total loss of the organ we cannot stop sound from reaching the ear; we cannot stop light from reaching the eye. What a responsibility we can drop from our shoulders. The child's relationship with life, with God, arrives with him into the world. We cannot take it away. We present-day parents often reproach ourselves with our children's faults, their shortcomings, their weaknesses of character. We may be to blame, but that is not the child's point of view unless we teach him so. I have a distinct memory of feeling in my own childhood, that even if my brothers teased me unmercifully it was my own fault if I lost my temper and became angry and enraged. And I have met with the same sense of responsibility for their own wrong actions in many very young children. We parents may blame ourselves, reproach ourselves for bad management, try hard to do better next time, and not to put stumbling blocks before our children, but surely we must never take from them this acute sense of feeling responsible for their own actions.

With such thoughts of children as persons then, where does our duty lie? If we are not to stand aside entirely and let the child fulfil his own relationships, what are we to do? Let us use again this useful metaphor of ear and eye.

If a child is cared for from birth, kept clean and healthy, suitably fed, protected from extreme cold or heat, in suitable surroundings, his physical well-being progresses naturally from stage to stage. But we are needed to provide the opportunities for his growth. His future well-being in this sense lies entirely in our hands. We can go further, we can provide, for example, beauty for ear and eye, material and scope for the ear and eye to train themselves upon, till they are able to make a full use of the wonderful power that is inherent in them—the eye sensitive to form and colour, the ear able to hear intricate combinations of sound.

Look at two men travelling together. What a landscape,

what a cloud, what a building, all a feast of beauty to the one; nothing but trees and fields, a rainy sky, somebody or other's house, to the other.

So here, I think comes in the relationship between the person and education. The person is there equipped to make his own relationships with the world around. Education must give the opportunity, the material on which the person may grow and develop, so that he may enjoy the fulfilment of them. The ultimate thing is there, exists from birth, is not ours to give or to withhold, but as educators, the immediate is our responsibility. If we do not help then we hinder our children.

From this truth then, "Children are born persons," do you not agree with me that we begin to understand the *why* of education? Children are born persons, and as persons have a right to expect food at our hands and certain other conditions for body and mind. Otherwise *can* they develop to their full stature? And so intricate, so difficult for us to comprehend is the relationship of the tangible visible body with the intangible mind, that the giving of suitable food and care to the body has as much effect on the right development of the mind, as the giving of suitable food and care to the mind has effect on the growth and development of the body.

The teaching we receive from our spiritual leaders, our leaders in religious thought, and the teaching we receive from the masters of science, are surely not then conflicting, but rather converging to give us solid ground on which we may stand as educators. We need not be dazzled and blinded, but only illuminated by new light on one side or the other. A person means to us something tangible and something intangible. A person is one indivisible complete creation.

I think the *how* of education now becomes a much more straight-forward problem to face.

And Miss Mason's *how* of education is so appealing to our common sense once we have seen the vision of the child as a person, it is so practical, and, looking backwards for a moment, so successful, that many of us accept it as it stands, and hardly give a thought to the *why*.

Let us look through it in a cursory way, to see again how she builds on principles, or rather on the one underlying principle, "Children are born persons."

"They are not born either good or bad, but with possibilities for good and for evil." "With a father like that, we cannot hope for much from him, poor boy." Is that an attitude of mind we can accept if we believe in children as persons? No, we understand

that every single person has his own relationships to fulfil, and even if, as we say, he inherits tendencies, there is no reason that with a well nourished, well disciplined mind and body, he should not recover the balance that a previous generation has lost for him. He may have a tremendous uphill struggle against the "sins of the fathers," but it need not be a hopeless one. I need not take time to give examples, they leap to mind. Dr. Barnardo's homes, and all such institutions, illustrate the fact for us that children with the worst possible antecedents may grow to be persons of rich full life, of fulfilled relations.

"The principles of authority on the one hand and of obedience on the other are natural, necessary and fundamental." Why? Because the function of an experienced person is to secure for the inexperienced certain safeguards, until *and only until* the inexperienced have grown to the age of independence. Also we inherit the experience of the ages. By virtue of being born in the twentieth century, we inherit two thousand years and more of the world's known experience, and are always feeling further and further back for knowledge about the more remote ages. It is a dignified calling, that of linking up the whole of the past with a younger generation, and we lose if we forget our dignity and climb down to an equality with our children, however much we long to have their confidence and their friendship, as companions and equals. They are not our equals in experience, though they may be, and we hope they will be our superiors in all the virtues, and though we ourselves find that we constantly learn at their feet. "A child in the midst."

But *"these principles are limited by the respect due to the personality of children, which must not be encroached upon, whether by the direct use of fear or love, suggestion or influence, or by undue play upon any one natural desire."*

Here is our gold thread shining bright, and if we hold it fast, we find it leading us safely past dark mysterious woods, seductive streamlets, enticing side paths. If we get tired of the severity of our gold thread, and let it go and penetrate into the tempting by-ways, more than it will permit us to do, we get lost, and find in the end that we only come out where we went in, that the by-paths had not much, if anything to offer us, and that meanwhile we have wasted our precious time most lamentably.

"Must not be encroached upon whether by fear or love," does this not warn us of much of what the psycho-analysts have evolved? Miss Mason told us to beware forty years ago. Others are better fitted than I am to be critics or exponents of psycho-

analysis, but it seems to me that half the complexes I have heard of and read about can be traced back to the encroachment on the personality of one person by another who is in some respects stronger; and to digress for a moment it would seem that the other half of the complexes can be traced to the fact that when a child's mind was hungry, knowledge—and particularly sex knowledge—was withheld from it.

I have found nothing in any book for the help of parents, so rich and full of insight and wisdom as Miss Mason's chapter on "The Sacredness of Personality" in her "Essay towards a Philosophy of Education." It warns us of the pitfalls, and gives us courage to take heart. We need not fear for example, that we shall do an injury to our boys who are growing up, by loving them too much. We need not fear we will give them a "mother" complex. We cannot love our children too much, and it is not wrong that they should be generous in their affection for us, *but* we may not infringe on their personality by one hairsbreadth, in using their love for us as a lever in education.

Do not mistake me and think that I mean that a child's love for a parent may not be a lever to himself. This is quite a different matter. A child's love for his parents may be an inspiration and a "guardian angel" to him through life. But there he is using his own lever in a rightful way. There is just all the difference in the world between that and a parent using this lever for the child, and not only this particular lever, but all the others.

I will not take much time to follow up the lever's suggestion and influence. When I first studied *Home Education*, at Ambleside, I did not have a clear understanding of what suggestion and influence meant. I picked up not long ago from a library a little book with a very noble title, a book evidently much read and fingered. I could hardly get through the pages. In every one the parent must use her influence for that, must suggest this even to the extent of whispering in the child's ear as he falls asleep at night—however bad and naughty he has been all day—"I am a good boy, I am a good boy, I AM a good boy." And, hey presto, in the morning, he will wake up a good boy, with his faults of character dropped from him!

What an encroachment on personality. What a coming between the child and his direct relation with life. What a deflecting of our own light, on to the child, imagining that it may I point to two other chapters in Miss Mason's "Essay,"

those entitled "The Way of Will" and "The Way of Reason." It is beyond the scope of this paper to do more than indicate the direction of Miss Mason's teaching on this subject—how we may help our children to arm themselves against the encroachment of the dominating personalities that come into the lives of us all.

And so with these great principles, which have arisen from the realisation of the child as a person, we ask again, "Then how?" If we are not to use fear or love, suggestion, or influence or undue play on *any one natural desire*, competition, love of prizes, love of approbation, and all the other natural desires, nor yet use the conscious influence of our personality again we ask, what are we to *do*? We must *do* something, not merely be negative educators surely. Oh yes, there is much to do, so much that it fills a lifetime to overflowing. Here are our three legitimate educational instruments, and a lifetime seems hardly enough to perfect ourselves in the use of them.

We may strive to create a good *atmosphere* for the tender baby person to be born into, and to grow up in. I think we shall all agree that a spiritual environment of love and straightforwardness and a material environment of beauty and simplicity will make the most benign environment for this new person that has come amongst us to find room for free growth; not, as Miss Mason tells us, a specially prepared atmosphere, but only our own home atmosphere kept as pure and wholesome as we know how to keep it. And for us mothers, too, many exciting outside interests, however splendid their aims, take their place as of secondary importance when we feel they are reacting on our homes, and making us rushed and harassed, and "too busy for anything."

Our second instrument is *discipline*. We cannot expect our children to live like beautiful plants in a lovely garden. We must prepare them to leave their home environment equipped for a stern world, in which there is right and wrong. And what could be a better equipment than good habits of every kind? A body will grow strong if it is ruled by good habits of living; a mind will grow strong if it is ruled by good habits of thinking; attention, diligence, application, facing difficulties, regular hard work and a legitimate use of recreation. What material for a schoolmaster to build on—here comes a person whose habitual behaviour is reasonable and responsible, and responsive because his parents trained him in right habits.

But there is more than atmosphere, there is more than discipline, there is the feeding of the soul, the mind, the spirit, whatever we may call it. In Miss Mason's words, "Education

is a *life*." We know ourselves that the more we read, and the more we do, the more we *think*. Something comes to us from here or from there, an idea, and we seize upon it, and make it part of ourselves. It becomes a permanent part of our life. We are supremely satisfied for the moment, and feel that being alive needs no further explanation. But that one idea doesn't last, we absorb it into our beings, and begin to be hungry for another. If we don't get a good idea, we get a bad one. If we don't get an inspiring thought, an exciting evil one may find a place to rest, and for the moment seems quite satisfying too. And perhaps our minds were not on the alert to distinguish and select between good and bad ideas; and it is only when the bad has turned our lives to gall and bitterness, that we wake up and find into what depths we had plunged. Again at this point my mind turns to Miss Mason's teaching on the Way of Will, and the Way of Reason, not only for the sake of the children in our care, but for the better ordering of our own lives.

When Miss Mason tells us then that our third legitimate instrument is the inspiration of living ideas, we understand what she means. We can't give our children ideas. We can only put them in the way of getting them for themselves. And we can only put them in the way of getting the noblest ideas by putting them in the way of finding them for themselves from the best books, that is from contact with the greatest minds. We cannot pick out the ideas for them, any more than we can pick out the vitamins of a meal, and pop them into a child's mouth, and feel he will be nourished. From our provision he will unconsciously select for himself that which he is prepared to make use of. Our only safe course in physical sustenance is within certain wide limits of age and capacity and suitability, a generous diet, and the very best of its kind that we are in a position to procure; and the same mentally within certain wide limits of age, capacity and suitability, a generous curriculum and the very best that can be procured.

It is a great responsibility, this of providing the right and adequate nourishment for the mind, and how grateful we feel to the Parents' Union School, and for the ability and toil of those who work to help us. I feel myself that we owe a debt of gratitude that can never be repaid to those whose acute, sensitive, understanding judgment is at our service unstintedly. They do not, doubtless, look for us to repay the debt. An indirect return comes to them perhaps in the fulness of life of the children for whom they toil.

I will not go further through our educational creed, nor

attempt to touch upon any more of the deep teaching to be found in Miss Mason's books. It is only of value to us in as much as we find it out for ourselves. *My* finding it of value to *me*, does not make it of value to you!

I will close with a paragraph from Miss Mason's *Essay towards a Philosophy of Education*. I have selected this paragraph because it gives us a practical, positive value as parents and educators:—

* "Now we must deal with a child of man, who has a natural desire to *know* the history of his race and of his nation, what men thought in the past and are thinking now; the best thoughts of the best minds taking form as literature, and at its highest as poetry, or, as poetry rendered in the plastic forms of art; as a child of God, whose supreme desire and glory it is to *know* about and to *know* his almighty Father: as a person of many parts and passions who must *know* how to use, care for, and discipline himself, body, mind and soul: as a person of many relationships—to family, city, church, state, neighbouring states, the world at large: as the inhabitant of a world full of beauty and interest, the features of which he must recognise and *know* how to name, and a world too, and a universe, whose every function of every part is ordered by laws which he must begin to *know*."

As parents and as educators we must nourish our children, and anyone else who comes into our lives as our responsibility, on knowledge as much as on daily bread.

I like the words of the Manx poet, T. E. Brown:

* "For so, it is, the nascent souls may wait,
And lose the flexile aptness of their years;
But if one meets them at the opening gate
Who fans their hopes and modifies their fears,
Then thrives the soul; the various growth appears,
Or meet for sunny blooms or tempests' grappling—
No wind uproots, drought quells, frost nips, blight seers
The well fed sapling."

* The italics are mine.